



Poll finds Bush suffering from 'second-term-itis'

By Susan Page, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — President Bush seems to have slipped into a second-term slump.

Posted 4/5/2005 11:19 PM

Support continues to erode for his signature goal of adding individual investment accounts to Social Security, according to a USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll taken Friday and Saturday. The coalition that gave him four more years in office is showing signs of strain over the Terri Schiavo case. And Americans are increasingly distressed about gas prices and wary about his central justification for going to war in Iraq.

Andy Kohut, director of the non-partisan Pew Research Center, says Bush seems to have caught "a mild case of second-term-itis," an affliction that has beset every re-elected president in at least a half-century. "It's where whatever boost the administration gets with a new second term disappears and the public begins to be a little disgruntled," he says.

Rochelle Alladice, 33, a Democrat from the Bronx, agrees with Bush on the Schiavo case. Bush signed a hurriedly passed bill giving federal courts jurisdiction in the dispute over whether to reattach a feeding tube to the brain-damaged woman. But Alladice has other issues on her mind.

"The economy, job market, Social Security, health benefits," says the bridal consultant, who was among those called in the survey. "You know, things that are more pressing they seem to ignore."

In the poll:

- On Social Security, after weeks of road trips by the president arguing the need to address the issue, the public's urgency paradoxically dropped a bit. The number who say it's extremely important for Congress to deal with Social Security this year fell to 37% from 41% in early February.

For the first time, a majority oppose his plan to add investment accounts even if the poll question doesn't mention it would mean a reduction in guaranteed benefits.

- On Iraq, Americans by 50%-48% say the Bush administration deliberately misled the American public about whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, the reason Bush emphasized in making the case for war. It is the first time more people than not see an attempt to mislead.

- On gas prices, 58% say recent price increases have caused a financial hardship, the first time during Bush's presidency that a majority has felt that way. Gas prices are an important driver in shaping views of the economy and the president. His job-approval rating dipped to the mid-40s last spring and this spring — coinciding with times when the average price of a gallon of gas topped \$2.

Bush's approval rating has risen 3 percentage points over the past two weeks, to 48%, and his standing on such personal characteristics as "cares about people like me" has held steady or improved slightly.

But his rating on handling the economy dropped to 41%, down 7 percentage points from a month ago. His disapproval rating on handling Social Security is the highest of his presidency, at 57%.

The dispute over Schiavo, who died last week, divides Bush's most reliable supporters. Religious conservatives were among those who argued he had a moral duty to try to preserve her life. But among all conservatives — including those drawn to the GOP not on social issues but because of its stance on, say, taxes or terrorism — 42% disapprove of Bush's handling of Schiavo, and 66% disapprove of Congress' action.

The survey of 1,040 adults has a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points.

"It's the one thing I really don't like about Bush: He's guided by his religious beliefs more so than what the American people want," says Bernard Harahan, 27, of Exton, Pa. A Republican who voted for Bush in November, he was called in the survey.

Tracey Schmitt, spokesman for the Republican National Committee, says Bush "makes decisions based on principle rather than polls."

Matthew Dowd, chief strategist for Bush's re-election campaign, doubts the Schiavo case will be a factor in congressional races in 2006 or the presidential campaign in 2008. "Any side that tries to use the Schiavo case will pay a price with the voters," he says.

The poll has "more to do with the public being concerned about the economy and Social Security than they are about anything else," he says. "They're asking themselves the question, 'Why isn't Washington focusing on the things I care about?'"

Contributing: William Risser •

▪ [REPRINTS & PERMISSIONS](#)

http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-04-05-bush-poll-support_x.htm